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POINT OF VIEW

Letters

Gaming or Gambling?

Dear Editor

With a few exceptions, the article by William V. Ackerman, "Financing Historic Preservation in Rural Communities: A Case for Legalized Gaming" (Vol. 19, No. 4), employs throughout the "gaming" euphemism invariably used by the gambling industry. It's clear why those promoting legalized gambling favor this term: while "gambling" carries a lot of negative baggage, who could be against playing games? It's less clear why an official publication of the National Park Service has to abet the industry's PR campaign in this way.

—Barry Mackintosh
Historian, NPS

Dear Editor

William V. Ackerman's article ("Financing Historic Preservation in Rural Communities," *CRM* Vol. 19, No. 4) does the cause of historic preservation a disservice by using the example of Deadwood, SD, to make "A Case for Legalized Gaming."

In short, it's a case for preserving buildings but forsaking people and communities. Paying for preservation through gambling proceeds, in the words of a Deadwood preservation advocate, is "like trying to make a bargain with the Devil."

Like most of its proponents, Ackerman attempts to sanitize gambling by calling it "gaming," as if this form of "financing" were some kind of disembodied and neutral revenue device, as innocuous as tiddly-winks, or as wholesome as Little League baseball.

Instead, slot machines—the most ubiquitous form of gambling in Deadwood—are deviously engaging bottomless boxes which dehumanize people drawn to them and destabilize communities that permit them. Of all the ways to invest our hopes for the future (or avoid unhappiness about the past or present) slot machines are among the most pernicious. Mesmerized by beeps and blinking lights, people throw money away and become compulsive, dead-eyed lever-pullers while sitting inside in degrading spaces.

Because slot machines make so much profit, they are a disincentive for a community to operate any other kind of business, except selling alcohol, which gamblers consume to dull the awareness of their multiple losses or to celebrate infrequent successes. Thus, every available building is turned over to as many slot machines as permitted or will fit inside, and the community becomes a slave to its cash cow idol. From what I saw in 1993, this is what happened to Deadwood. You can't even escape gambling in the supermarket, where slot machines line the front window.

"Not all the citizens of Deadwood are comfortable with the changes in their city," Ackerman acknowledges. "Residents are unable to shop where they used to, and their lifestyle has been crimped by increased traffic and lack of parking."

Their "lifestyle has been crimped?" One may as well say the same about seriously-injured people who have been raced to the hospital, while noting of their totaled car only that one tire is flat. Yes, some residents have struck it rich through gambling. But Ackerman fails to report the true damage. Among the casualties: legalized gambling displaced from Deadwood's downtown virtually everything people regularly rely on—hardware, pharmacy, laundromat, barbershop and the like—in favor of enterprises that exclusively feed and feed off tourists.

What those tourists experience in this National Register Historic Landmark District on Main Street is a bogus "history." An over-restored late-19th and early-20th-century commercial district is employed as a stage set for attempts to evoke an earlier gold rush/wild west atmosphere with which the restored architecture never co-existed.

Moreover, that atmosphere glamorizes 19th-century greed and violence in a way that we can appreciate only by imagining that the late 21st century will interpret our present urban culture solely by re-enacting drive-by shootings. From the tombstones for Wild Bill

Slot machines in Deadwood, SD.

Hickok and Calamity Jane up on Boot Hill, to Wild Bill's "death chair" displayed behind glass on a wall along with stuffed and mounted animals, to the implied link between gunslinger poker and slot machines, Deadwood romanticizes desperation and death, which Ackerman breezily glosses as "an exciting history of gold, outlaws, and gunfighters."

Well, more than the brief period of local history that involved get-rich-quick loners prospecting for gold and murderous low-lives drinking in the saloons, much more of Deadwood's past and present economy and culture is based on the open-pit, industrial-scale gold-mining that was still going on three years ago. This is the activity, I'm told, that built a community in Deadwood, bringing people to construct both that commercial Main Street and residences on the surrounding slopes.

High above Deadwood Gulch, on a residential street where tourists never go, the roof on a one-car garage provides eloquent testimony to that longer, stable, sober but creative chapter of local history. The garage was built in the 1930s by a worker in the gold refinery to shelter his first car. To sheath the roof, he brought home from work empty cyanide cans whose lids he flattened and fastened down like overlapping shingles. This vernacular garage roof is like much of Deadwood's historic cultural resources that are undervalued in the current obsession with such creepy icons as Wild Bill's alleged so-called "death chair."

For example, a Chinese inscription on a tiny headstone in a different part of the cemetery where Hickok is buried is a touchstone to the significant role that Chinese immigrants played, in building the region's railroads and providing the labor that underpinned the Main Street service economy long after the gold rush was over. At the more recent end of the historic timeline, Deadwood retains a Streamline-style gas station, as well as a range of building types and styles that span historic eras.

Then there is Deadwood Creek itself, where gold was discovered, setting in motion everything that produced a town here. But this foremost reason for Deadwood's very existence is now out of sight, gathered into a storm sewer culvert running under the highway that parallels Main Street. One of the best uses for the steady stream of preservation funds from gambling—besides supporting a local chapter of Gamblers Anonymous—would be to bury the highway under a Deadwood Creek restored to the surface.

Evaluating historic cultural resources requires us to consider the human values that produced them, and which also destroy or sustain them. For thousands of years, that creek was valued by Native Americans for its fresh water and associated wildlife. Then, because white European immigrants assigned extremely high value to a shiny metal, the place took on the feverish greed of those who came in pursuit of gold. Now, in the pursuit of tourist dollars, legalized gambling is reenacting that earlier period more thoroughly and lastingly than the reenactments of gunfights on Main Street.

Ackerman notes: "Deadwood has been a National Historic Landmark since 1961, recognized for its representation of the economic and social effects of western mining booms." Today's gambling boom is bringing its own economic and social effects. But Ackerman focuses exclusively on the economics of restoring buildings, and fails to recognize the social effects of the gambling boom on the community, including the degradation of the kind of values and diversified local economies that healthfully sustain communities.

"Hey, Deadwood was founded on gambling," a resident told me three years ago. "This is its karma."

Maybe so. But that doesn't mean the same strategy and outcome is desirable for other historic rural towns that don't want to save their buildings and lose their soul in the bargain.

—Richard J. Ewald
Architectural Historian
Westminster, Vermont

WASHINGTON REPORT

Cultural Resource Programs Management Council

A Message from the Associate Director

During my first year as Associate Director for Cultural Resource Stewardship and Partnerships, it became clear to me that if we were to make progress toward achieving any of our strategic goals in the cultural, recreation, and partnership programs, I needed to find a way to encourage wider involvement in policy and budget matters in my Associateship.

After examining several options, I decided to establish a Management Council. The role of this Council is to advise me on how the strategic plan can best be turned into action, including policy, budget, and work products as well as the development of criteria for allocating funds. The Council will also educate and advise each other on the stewardship and partnership programs. It will act as advocates for these programs inside the NPS and with the public. It will advise me on matters of public policy, professional practices and methodologies for the programs, and will provide a forum for interaction among the various entities and points of view.

The Council is composed of the WASO program managers in my Associateship as well as two representatives per Field Area. We meet twice a year as a group but sub-committees will meet as nec-